

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF TURKEY-IRAQ RELATIONS: 1534-2020

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Abstract: This article analyzes the historical formation and development stages of relations between Turkey and Iraq from 1534 to 2020. The study examines the political-territorial integration during the Ottoman period, territorial transformations during the colonial period, geopolitical competition during the Cold War, and cooperation and contradictions based on security and energy interests in the 21st century on a scientific basis. In particular, the Kurdish issue, water resources, border security, and energy policy are analyzed as the main determinants of bilateral relations. The article is written based on a historicism and systematic approach and deeply reveals the roots of modern Turkish-Iraqi relations.

Keywords: Turkey, Iraq, Ottoman Empire, Kurdish issue, energy security, water policy, geopolitics, Middle East, border security, historical relations.

Research methods and techniques. Various research methods, including historical and statistical data, were used in the process of writing this article.

Introduction

The relations between Turkey and Iraq are one of the important components of the geopolitics of the Middle East. These relations have a history of several centuries, and their formation and development are closely related to territorial, ethnic, religious and economic factors. In particular, the conquest of Baghdad by the Ottomans in 1534 is recognized as the starting point of these relations. This article systematically analyzes the evolution of Turkish-Iraqi relations between 1534 and 2020.

The Ottoman period: the formation of historical foundations (1534–1918)

As a result of the capture of Baghdad by Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent in 1534, the territory of Iraq was incorporated into the Ottoman Empire¹. During this period, there were no separate interstate relations between modern-day Turkey and Iraq, but they were governed within a single political space. During the Ottoman period, Iraq was divided into three provinces - Baghdad, Basra and Mosul, and a centralized system of administration was introduced. During this period, the regions were interconnected through religious unity (Sunniism), economic ties and trade routes.

The capture of Baghdad by Sultan Suleiman I (the Magnificent) in 1534 marked a fundamental turning point in the geopolitical space of the Middle East. This event was not only a military success, but also an important stage in the strategy of strengthening the eastern borders of the Ottoman Empire, gaining an advantage in competition with the Safavid state and controlling important trade routes. As a result, the territory of modern-day Iraq became an integral part of the Ottoman political system for several centuries.

Administrative administration and the system of provinces - Although the Ottomans tried to introduce centralized administration in the territory of Iraq, a flexible model of administration

¹ Uzunçarşılı İ.H. Osmanlı Tarihi. – Ankara: TTK, 1988.

was used due to the ethnic and tribal complexity of the territory. Iraq was divided into three main provinces: Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul. Each province was headed by a governor (wali), who was subordinate to the center - Istanbul.

However, in practice, the influence of the central government was not always uniform. In particular, in the Mosul and Kurdistan regions, local tribal chiefs and semi-independent emirates played an important role. This created a peculiar balance of center and periphery. It was this model that later became the historical root of the problems of governance in the border regions between Turkey and Iraq.

Religious and social structure - Although the Ottoman Empire was a state based on Sunni Islam, there was religious diversity in Iraq. While the Sunni population dominated in Baghdad and Mosul, Shiite communities were widespread in the southern regions. Religious centers such as Najaf and Karbala developed as important centers of Shiism. Although the Ottomans pursued a policy of religious tolerance, a certain degree of Sunni primacy remained. This later influenced the formation of confessional conflicts in Iraqi domestic politics. In this regard, the roots of some religious-political differences in today's Turkish-Iraqi relations date back to this period.

The formation of the Kurdish factor - During the Ottoman period, the Kurdish regions were considered a strategic "buffer zone" on the eastern borders of the empire. Many Kurdish emirates were granted a certain degree of autonomy. While this policy provided stability in the short term, it hindered the process of centralization in the long term. By the 19th century, as the Ottoman Empire intensified its policy of centralization, autonomous structures in the Kurdish regions began to be dismantled. This led to Kurdish uprisings². This process created the historical basis of the "Kurdish issue", which is one of the most important factors in the relations between Turkey and Iraq in the modern era.

Economic relations and trade routes - The territory of Iraq was one of the important economic regions during the Ottoman period. Baghdad, as an ancient trading center, played an important role in the transit trade routes between India, Iran and the Mediterranean. The port of Basra provided international trade relations through the Persian Gulf. Trade relations developed between the regions of Turkey (Anatolia) and Iraq, and this economic integration later created the historical basis for modern economic cooperation between the two countries.

Geopolitical rivalry and external factors - The long-standing rivalry between the Ottomans and the Safavids turned the territory of Iraq into a constant geopolitical struggle. Baghdad was repeatedly seized. This complicated the establishment of stable governance in the region. By the 19th century, European powers, especially Great Britain, began to actively enter the region. This led to the weakening of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent transfer of the territory of Iraq to the colonial system³.

The modern significance of historical heritage - The processes between 1534 and 1918 shaped the main structural elements of modern Turkish-Iraqi relations:

- a common historical space and political heritage;
- the formation of the ethnic (Kurdish) problem;
- the emergence of religious and confessional differences;
- the beginning of economic and trade integration.

The era of colonialism and new borders (1918–1945)

In 1918, as a result of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Iraq came under the British mandate. In 1926, an agreement was signed between Turkey and Britain on the issue of the Mosul province, and Mosul was transferred to Iraq. During this period, modern state borders

² McDowall D. A Modern History of the Kurds. – London: I.B. Tauris, 2004..

³ Fromkin D. A Peace to End All Peace. – New York: Holt, 1989.

were formed and formal diplomatic relations were established between Turkey and Iraq. At the same time, the division of the territories inhabited by the Kurds between the two states became one of the main sources of future conflicts.

The end of World War I in 1918 and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire led to fundamental geopolitical changes in the Middle East. As a result of this process, the territory of Iraq came under the control of Great Britain and artificial state borders were formed in the region. This period is of particular importance as the stage when the institutional foundations of interstate relations between modern Turkey and Iraq were formed.

The process of transition from Ottomans to nation states - Following the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the territory of Iraq was designated as a British mandate at the San Remo Conference in 1920⁴. Thus, a new political system began to form in Iraq. In 1921, the Kingdom of Iraq was established under the leadership of Faisal I. This process also led to fundamental political changes in Turkey. In 1923, the Republic of Turkey was established. As a result, the territories that were previously part of a single political space were now separated as two independent states. This paved the way for the beginning of interstate diplomatic relations.

The Mosul issue and territorial disputes - One of the most important and controversial issues of this period was control over the Mosul region. Mosul was a strategically and economically important region with rich oil reserves. While Turkey considered Mosul to be its territory on historical and ethnic grounds, Great Britain sought to keep it within Iraq. In 1926, a decision was made on the Mosul issue under the mediation of the League of Nations, and the territory remained within Iraq⁵. Turkey was forced to accept this decision, in exchange for certain economic compensations. This agreement created the legal basis for the Turkish-Iraqi borders.

Although the resolution of the Mosul issue ended the formal dispute, it had a long-term impact on the issue of trust between the two countries. In particular, the division of the Kurdish-populated areas became a key factor in subsequent conflicts.

Border security and Kurdish uprisings - In the 1920s and 1930s, the borders of Turkey and Iraq were formed as an unstable area. Cross-border movements and uprisings of Kurdish tribes created serious security problems for both countries. The Sheikh Said uprising in Turkey (1925) and the Barzan uprising in Iraq were among the most important events of this period⁶. Both countries took steps to suppress Kurdish movements and were forced to cooperate to a certain extent in this regard. As a result, security issues became a central component of Turkish-Iraqi relations. This trend has continued in subsequent periods.

Regional Cooperation and the Sadabad Pact - In 1937, the Sadabad Pact was signed between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan⁷. This agreement was aimed at ensuring stability in the region and respecting mutual territorial integrity. The Sadabad Pact served to strengthen diplomatic relations between Turkey and Iraq. In particular, cooperation on border security and internal stability increased. This led to the formation of institutional dialogue between the two countries.

Economic factors and energy interests - Although economic relations were still limited during this period, the oil factor gradually began to gain importance. The oil reserves in the

⁴ Fromkin D. *A Peace to End All Peace*. – New York: Holt, 1989.

⁵ League of Nations. *Mosul Question Report*, 1926.

⁶ McDowall D. *A Modern History of the Kurds*. – London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.

⁷ Olson R. *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism*. – Texas Press, 1989.

Mosul and Kirkuk regions attracted the attention of Great Britain and international companies. Although Turkey did not participate directly in this process, the foundation for future energy cooperation was laid. It was during this period that transport routes began to form for Iraqi oil to reach international markets.

Influence of external forces and geopolitical balance - Between 1918 and 1945, relations between Turkey and Iraq were shaped mainly under the influence of external forces, in particular Great Britain. Iraq's colonial status limited its ability to conduct its foreign policy independently. Turkey, on the other hand, sought to pursue an independent foreign policy during this period and tried to maintain stability in the region. This difference created an asymmetric nature of relations between the two countries.

The historical significance of the period - the period from 1918 to 1945 - determined the main parameters of modern Turkish-Iraqi relations:

- the legal formation of state borders
- the experience of territorial disputes through the Mosul issue
- the transformation of the Kurdish factor into a cross-border security problem
- the emergence of regional cooperation mechanisms
- the strength of the influence of external forces

In this regard, this period can be assessed as the institutional and geopolitical foundation of modern relations between Turkey and Iraq.

Cold War and Regional Alliances (1945–1991)

During the Cold War, Turkey joined the Western bloc and became a member of NATO, while Iraq at various times developed closer ties with the USSR. The Baghdad Pact was signed in 1955, but Iraq withdrew from the alliance after the 1958 revolution.

During the Iran–Iraq War of 1980–1988, Turkey pursued a neutral policy and prioritized economic interests. During this period, Turkish–Iraqi trade relations developed, especially through oil exports.

Turkey supported Iraq's territorial integrity, but expressed concern about the expansion of Kurdish autonomy⁶.

Cooperation in the energy sector intensified. Iraqi oil began to be exported through Turkish territory. This increased economic interdependence.

Cold War and Regional Geopolitical Competition (1945–1991) - The post-World War II period was characterized by a bipolar order in the international system—the Western bloc led by the United States and the Eastern bloc led by the USSR. This geopolitical confrontation also had a profound impact on the Middle East region. Turkey and Iraq developed their relations in a complex and multifaceted manner during this period, choosing different geopolitical directions.

Divergence of geopolitical directions - After 1945, Turkey chose a policy of rapprochement with the West and joined NATO in 1952⁸. This made it an important strategic partner of the Western bloc during the Cold War. Iraq, while initially pursuing a policy close to the West, gradually changed its course as a result of internal political changes.

In 1955, Turkey and Iraq cooperated in the Baghdad Pact⁹. The main purpose of this pact was to limit Soviet influence and ensure security in the region. However, in 1958, when the monarchy was overthrown in Iraq and a republican system was established, the country withdrew

⁸ Hale W. Turkish Foreign Policy. – London: Routledge, 2000.

⁹ Marr P. The Modern History of Iraq. – Westview Press, 2012.

from this alliance. As a result, a significant difference in geopolitical orientations between Turkey and Iraq emerged.

Internal political instability and its impact on foreign relations - After the 1958 revolution, a period of political instability began in Iraq. Military coups, power struggles, and ideological changes negatively affected the consistency of the country's foreign policy. The coming to power of the Baath Party in 1968 and the subsequent emergence of Saddam Hussein on the political scene marked a new stage in Iraqi foreign policy¹⁰.

Turkey, on the other hand, retained a relatively stable state system, but it also experienced military coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980. Despite this, Turkey's foreign policy direction — integration with the West — remained unchanged.

The Kurdish issue and cross-border security — During this period, the Kurdish issue became the most important security component of Turkish-Iraqi relations. In Iraq, the Kurds fought for autonomy, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, the movement led by Mustafa Barzani intensified¹¹.

Turkey closely monitored this process, as Kurdish nationalism was seen as a threat to its territorial integrity. By the 1980s, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) had become more active, and northern Iraq had become one of its main bases. In 1983, a security agreement was signed between Turkey and Iraq, granting Turkey the right to conduct limited military operations in Iraqi territory¹². This was an important stage in the security cooperation between the two countries.

Economic relations and energy cooperation - During the Cold War, economic relations between Turkey and Iraq, especially in the energy sector, developed. The commissioning of the Kirkuk-Yumurtalik oil pipeline in the 1970s brought economic cooperation between the two countries to a new level¹³.

Through this pipeline, Iraqi oil was exported to the Mediterranean Sea through Turkish territory. This brought transit income to Turkey and expanded export opportunities for Iraq. Thus, energy interests strengthened the interdependence between the two countries.

Iran-Iraq War and Regional Balance - The Iran-Iraq War of 1980–1988 had a significant impact on Turkish-Iraqi relations. Although Turkey officially pursued a neutral policy, it continued to cooperate with Iraq economically. During the war, Turkey became an important trade and logistics route for Iraq. This led to further strengthening of economic relations between the two countries. At the same time, Turkey tried to maintain the balance of power in the region.

The end of an era and the transition to a new stage - Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the 1991 Gulf War marked the beginning of a new era after the Cold War. These events marked a turning point in Turkish-Iraqi relations. Turkey supported the international coalition and joined the economic sanctions against Iraq. This led to a cooling in relations between the two countries and led to an aggravation of security problems in the subsequent period.

Historical significance of the period - the period from 1945 to 1991 formed the following main trends in Turkish-Iraqi relations:

- separation of geopolitical directions (Western and Eastern blocs)

¹⁰ Tripp C. A History of Iraq. – Cambridge University Press, 2007.

¹¹ McDowall D. A Modern History of the Kurds. – London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.

¹² Gunter M. The Kurdish Question in Turkey. – London, 1999.

¹³ Barkey H. Turkey and Iraq Relations. – USIP, 2011.

- prioritization of security issues
- transformation of the Kurdish factor into a strategic problem
- beginning of energy cooperation
- increased influence of external factors

This period plays an important role in understanding the modern stage of Turkish-Iraqi relations, especially in the areas of security and energy.

The Post-Gulf War Era and the New Geopolitical Reality (1991–2003)

The outbreak of the Gulf War in 1991 and the defeat of Iraq by an international coalition fundamentally changed the geopolitical system of the Middle East. This event had a direct and profound impact not only on Iraq's internal political structure, but also on its relations with Turkey. As a result, Turkish-Iraqi relations entered a new phase - a complex period marked by security, territorial integrity, and humanitarian crises.

The Weakening of Iraq - After the 1991 war, Iraq was under strong economic and political sanctions. The embargo imposed by the UN sharply weakened the country's economy¹⁴. Central government control has been significantly reduced, especially in the northern regions. This situation has created a “power vacuum” in the region. It is this vacuum that has led to the strengthening of Kurdish political movements and the formation of a de facto autonomous structure. In 1992, a de facto self-government system was formed in Iraqi Kurdistan¹⁵.

Turkey's Security Doctrine and the PKK Problem - The most important issue for Turkey during this period was the rise of the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party). Northern Iraq became a major stronghold for the PKK. This was seen by Turkey as a direct threat to national security.

As a result, Turkey carried out several cross-border military operations into northern Iraq during the 1990s.¹⁶ These operations were officially justified as a fight against the PKK, but they were perceived by the Baghdad government as a violation of sovereignty. Thus, the security component became a priority in Turkish-Iraqi relations, and diplomatic relations were relegated to the background.

“No-fly zone” and the institutionalization of Iraqi Kurdistan - Starting in 1991, the US, Great Britain and France imposed a “no-fly zone” in northern Iraq⁴. This decision further weakened the control of the central Baghdad government over the northern regions.

As a result, Kurdish political institutions were strengthened in the Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Dohuk regions, and a de facto autonomous region was formed. This process raised two concerns for Turkey: first, the strengthening of PKK activities, and second, the legitimization of the Kurdish national movement.

Continuing energy and economic ties - Despite political tensions, economic ties between Turkey and Iraq have not completely ceased. Oil exports, in particular, through the port of Ceyhan, have remained important. In 1996, with the launch of the UN Oil-for-Food program, Iraqi oil exports partially resumed.¹⁷ Turkey played an important role in this process as a transit country. This suggests that economic interests have partially mitigated political tensions. At the

¹⁴ Tripp C. A History of Iraq. – Cambridge University Press, 2007.

¹⁵ McDowall D. A Modern History of the Kurds. – London: I.B. Tauris, 2004.

¹⁶ Gunter M. The Kurdish Question in Turkey. – London, 1999.

¹⁷ Pelletiere S. The Oil-for-Food Program and Iraq. – Washington, 2001.

same time, energy ties have prevented a complete breakdown in relations between the two countries.

Diplomatic relations and limited dialogue - During the 1990s, diplomatic relations between Turkey and Iraq remained minimal. Although embassies continued to operate, the level of political trust was low. The main dialogue revolved around security issues and border issues.

Turkey maintained its position of supporting Iraq's territorial integrity within the framework of UN resolutions. However, the priority of security in practical politics limited diplomatic cooperation.

US factor and regional geopolitics - During this period, the US became the main external actor in Middle East politics. The sanctions and military control imposed on Iraq after the 1991 war changed the regional balance of power. Turkey, as a member of NATO, continued to cooperate with the US, but in some cases pursued a cautious policy on the issue of Iraq. This situation reflects Turkey's strategy of "integration with the West - balancing regional interests".

The end of the era and the transition to 2003 - The period from 1991 to 2003 is considered a transitional period in Turkish-Iraqi relations. During this period, the following main trends were formed:

- The political and economic weakening of Iraq
- The de facto formation of Kurdish autonomy
- The escalation of the PKK problem
- Turkey's security-oriented foreign policy
- The preservation of limited economic cooperation
- The strengthening of the US and UN factor
- The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 ushered in a new geopolitical era and brought Turkish-Iraqi relations to a completely new level.

The US Invasion of Iraq and the New Geopolitical Order (2003–2020)

The military intervention in Iraq by the US-led international coalition in 2003 fundamentally changed the geopolitical balance in the Middle East. As a result of the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime, the Iraqi state system collapsed and new political institutions began to form. These changes brought Turkish-Iraqi relations to a new stage - multi-layered, complex and closely related to security and energy.

Reconstruction of the Iraqi state system and the federal model - After 2003, a new political system was formed in Iraq under US leadership. Based on the 2005 Constitution, Iraq was reorganized as a federal republic¹⁸. This system officially consolidated the status of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region (IKR) for the Kurds. This change was of dual importance for Turkey: on the one hand, the territorial integrity of Iraq was preserved, and on the other hand, the institutionalization of Kurdish autonomy was strengthened. In particular, Erbil was strengthened economically and politically as a center.

Transformation of Turkish foreign policy - Since the 2000s, active and multi-directional diplomacy has become more prominent in Turkish foreign policy. As part of the "zero problems with neighbors" policy, Turkey sought to restore relations with Iraq¹⁹. Ankara has developed

¹⁸ Constitution of the Republic of Iraq, 2005.

¹⁹ Davutoğlu A. Strategic Depth. – Istanbul, 2001.

parallel diplomatic relations with both Baghdad and Erbil. This reflects Turkey's strategy of establishing pragmatic relations with all political actors within Iraq. However, the Kurdish issue has remained the most complex component of this strategy.

Kurdish autonomy and oil policy - The Iraqi Kurdistan Region began to pursue an economically independent policy in the 2000s. In particular, disagreements between Erbil and Baghdad over oil exports intensified. Turkey, on the other hand, has developed direct energy cooperation with the Kurdistan Region based on a pragmatic approach. Since 2013, Iraqi Kurdistan oil has been exported via Turkish territory to the port of Ceyhan. This process was met with discontent by Baghdad, as it was viewed as a restriction of the sovereign rights of the central government. Thus, the energy issue has become a factor shaping cooperation and conflict in Turkish-Iraqi relations at the same time.

Arab Spring and regional instability - The Arab Spring processes that began in 2011 have increased political instability in the Middle East. Political institutions in Iraq have weakened and internal conflicts have intensified. This situation has created the basis for the rise of extremist groups, in particular ISIS (Daesh), which emerged in 2014. ISIS's capture of Mosul has led to a serious crisis in the Iraqi state system. Turkey has participated in the fight against ISIS as part of the international coalition, but at the same time has also considered the issue of the PKK and its affiliates as a security threat. **Security cooperation and military operations** - Between 2003 and 2020, Turkey has carried out several military operations against the PKK in northern Iraq. These operations have continued with the "Claw" series of operations. Although the Baghdad government sometimes viewed these actions as a violation of sovereignty, in practice the security vacuum in northern Iraq made such operations inevitable. Thus, the issue of security has become the most sensitive point in relations between the two countries.

Water resources and environmental diplomacy - Another important issue between Turkey and Iraq has been water resources. Hydrotechnical projects built in Turkey on the Tigris and Euphrates rivers have been viewed by Iraq as a threat to water scarcity²⁰. The Iraqi side demanded that Turkey comply with international standards in regulating water flows. This issue formed a new direction between the two countries, called "water diplomacy".

The post-ISIS era and political balance - the independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan in 2017 was met with sharp protests by Turkey and Iraq. This event once again brought the principle of regional integrity to the agenda. After the referendum, Baghdad managed to restore central control, which made it necessary for Turkey to reconsider the balance in relations with Iraq. The years 2003–2020 shaped the following main trends in Turkish-Iraqi relations:

- ✓ Iraq's transition to a federal system
- ✓ Increasing Kurdish autonomy
- ✓ Expanding and conflicting energy cooperation
- ✓ The ISIS threat and security cooperation
- ✓ Turkey's multi-pronged pragmatic policy
- ✓ Diplomatic disagreements over water resources

In general, this period shaped relations between Turkey and Iraq based on the "competition + cooperation" model. This model is the basic structure of complex geopolitical relations that continue to this day.

Conclusion

Between 1534 and 2020, relations between Turkey and Iraq have undergone a complex historical evolution. These relations have developed in several stages, each period characterized

²⁰ FAO Water Resources Report on Tigris-Euphrates Basin, 2018

by its own geopolitical, economic, and security factors. The territorial unity that emerged under a single political system during the Ottoman period was later broken up during the colonial period, leading to the emergence of modern state borders. Between 1918 and 1945, the issue of Mosul and the division of Kurdish territories formed the main historical conflicts between the two countries. During the Cold War (1945–1991), Turkey and Iraq integrated into various geopolitical blocs, but maintained limited cooperation on energy and security issues. During this period, the Kurdish issue became a cross-border security issue. In the period after 1991, the weakening of Iraq, the strengthening of the PKK, and the formation of Kurdish autonomy further complicated relations. After 2003, Iraq's transition to a federal system transformed Turkish-Iraqi relations into a model of "cooperation and competition".

In the 2010s-2020s, energy, water resources and security issues became the main priorities. In particular, the fight against ISIS, the Kurdistan referendum and cross-border operations marked the most sensitive points in the relations between the two countries. In general, Turkish-Iraqi relations have historically been based on three main determinants:

- geopolitical location and the influence of external forces
- the Kurdish issue and the security paradigm
- strategic interests in energy and water resources

As a result, these relations continue to this day as a geopolitical system that does not have a completely stable model, but rather a constantly changing and multi-layered one.

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